

Lion hunt: a royal tomb-effigy at Arbroath Abbey

G S Gimson*

ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the results of a search for evidence to identify the subject of a tomb-effigy of Frosterley (Durham) marble at Arbroath Abbey. The effigy probably dates to the early 14th century and is of a quality unique in Scotland. It was unearthed in the Abbey ruins in 1816 and was at that time taken to be that of King William the Lion, founder of the Abbey. Since then, opinions have varied. The search involved examination of similar effigies in north-east England and study of the iconography of kingship in Scotland. In addition, a family link between the subjects of four of the English effigies and King Robert I (Bruce) opened up a new vein of inquiry. It will be suggested that the whole material supports the proposition that the effigy is of King William the Lion. If so, it is the only surviving effigy of a medieval King of Scotland. The evidence also supports an inference that King Robert I was probably concerned in its provision.

HISTORY

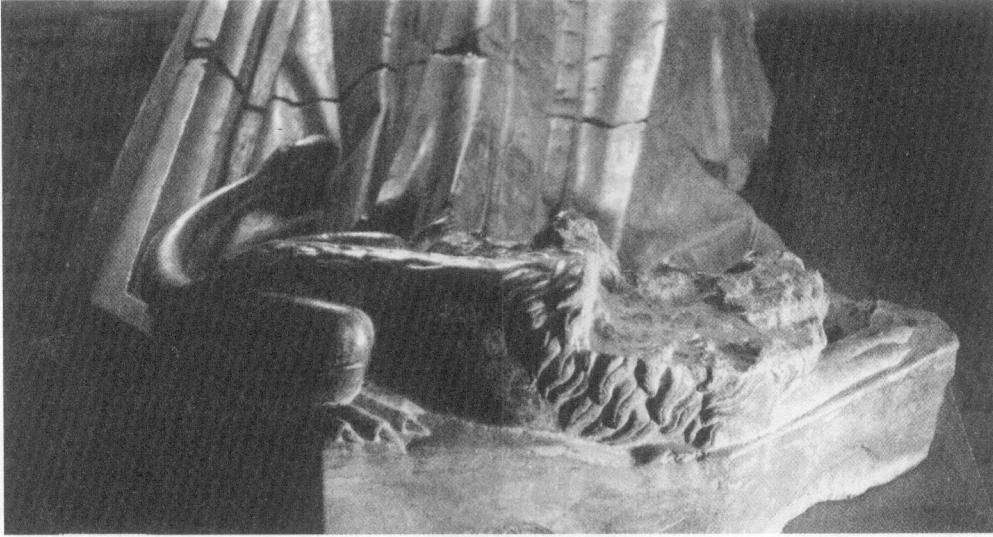
Arbroath Abbey, one of the four great Tironensian abbeys in Scotland, was founded by King William the Lion in 1178. He endowed it richly and it remained one of the most important religious houses in the country. When the king died in 1214, he was buried in front of the high altar of the Abbey (Anderson 1922, vol 2, 400). The Abbey was not consecrated until 1223. Building was presumably complete in all essentials by then. In 1272, the Abbey was very extensively damaged as the result of a violent storm and fire. The towers were burned and the church consumed (Bower, *vol 5. 385: Chron Extracta 1842, 111*). From these accounts, it seems unlikely that the king's original tomb – probably a simple slab – would have escaped serious damage, situated as it was between the central tower and the east gable. The fact that that gable (heavily restored in the 19th century) appears to be a 13th-century rebuild (Cruden 1986, 54) suggests that the damage extended to the extreme east end of the church.

It has been noted (Fawcett 1990, 176) that after the death of Alexander III in 1286, there was a lengthy hiatus in major building in Scotland, and it seems quite possible that this would continue, in a large-scale undertaking such as would have been required at Arbroath, until after the accession of Robert Bruce in 1306 and until he had consolidated his position and the country had begun to benefit from the resulting stability. In a major rebuild, items such as monuments would naturally be left until a late stage. From 1311 until 1328, the Abbot of Arbroath was Bernard who was also Chancellor of the realm and one of Bruce's staunchest supporters.

* Advocates' Library, Parliament House, Edinburgh EH1 1RF



ILLUS 1 The Frosterley marble effigy in the museum at Arbroath Abbey. The darts indicate the positions of the attendant figures (the one on the lower right side is questionable)



ILLUS 2 The foot-rest of the effigy at Arbroath

The only surviving reference to King William's tomb in medieval times is a grant by King Robert I in 1315 of 4 marks annually from the revenues of Kinghorn: 'ad sustendandum luminare circa tumbam bone memorie domini willelmi regis' (Duncan 1988, 360). The date of this grant is considered to be of major significance.

After the Reformation, the Abbey was neglected and fell into ruin. In the 19th century, the ruins were in the care of the Barons of the Exchequer. On 20 March 1816 their workmen were clearing debris at the east end of the church in front of the site of the high altar, when they uncovered the effigy (illus 1 & 2). It was described in the local newspaper (*Montrose Courier*, 29 March 1816) as 'a beautiful blue marble stone on which was carved the effigy of the king with the lion under his feet'. A coffin below the slab contained 'bones of a man of considerable stature'. These findings were assumed to relate to William the Lion. From time to time thereafter, reservations were expressed of the sufficiency of the indications from the effigy itself to justify the identification (eg by Cosmo Innes at page xxiii of the Preface to vol 2. of the *Arbroath Liber*). On the other hand, Robert Brydall in his pioneering survey of the monumental effigies of Scotland (1895, 339–42) accepted the royal attribution and expressed no doubt.

In 1835, in the course of further clearing at the Abbey, the coffin was found to be flanked by two others, those of a lady and a bishop (Sutherland 1860, 8).

DESCRIPTION

The 'blue marble stone' is a blue-grey fossil-bearing limestone from County Durham, known as Frosterley or Stanhope marble. The head, shoulders and arms of the figure are missing, but otherwise it is fairly complete from the chest down to the lion foot-rest. It wears a full-length bordered mantle over a full-length robe, with a narrow ornamented girdle and *aumonière* purse. There is a reference in 1829 that traces of gold had been seen in the folds of the clothing (Thomson 1829, 34). There are remains of several small attendant figures, much damaged. Three of these

wear chain-mail and spurs and their mailed hands rest on the robes of the figure (illus 5a/b). There have also been figures among the folds of cloth at the feet of the effigy. One is almost complete (illus 5c), its hands resting on the robes: another is represented only by one hand, also resting on the robes, and there is a minimal ridge beside the lion's claws at the broken edge of the slab, which might possibly indicate a fold of the skirt of a third. (A further figure at that point would balance the composition.) These figures seem to be of young women.

The lion foot-rest is strikingly carved, with a blend of heraldry and naturalism and the whole of the sculpture is of the most impressive design and execution.

THE PROBLEM OF IDENTIFICATION

PUBLISHED OPINIONS

Nineteenth-century opinion is represented by the views of Cosmo Innes and Robert Brydall, noted above. In recent years, the successive government agencies responsible for the Abbey have found the original attribution unacceptable. No doubt this is due in part to the realization that the effigy dates to the 14th century – a century later than William's death. In 1954, the official guidebook followed Cosmo Innes, R L Mackie writing that 'it is possible that this is the effigy of King William' (p 5) while Stewart Cruden (p 24) preferred to say that it 'is believed to be the royal tomb' and described the effigy as of 'a distinguished lay personage'. In an adaptation of the text for an edition in 1982, Richard Fawcett substituted the words 'what was then believed to be the royal tomb', while retaining the 'distinguished lay personage' (p 9). These are, of course, short popular accounts intended for visitors to the Abbey, and do not disclose the grounds for the change of view.

In the meantime, J S Richardson in his Rhind Lectures, delivered in 1949, (1964, 68–9) had come out strongly for the view that the effigy represents the king in coronation robes, suggesting also that one interpretation of the mail-clad attendants might be that they represent the earls who took part in the coronation ceremony.

In 1985, at the Harlaxton Symposium, G D S Henderson of Cambridge delivered a paper discussing the effigy in detail and in a wider context (Henderson 1986, 88). He found a number of reasons for preferring the view that the sculpture represents the king, including the find-site and the iconography. He also suggested that the length of the robes supported the identification as a king (*ibid*, 97, see also Tummers (1980, 60) who found that in effigies of civilians the supertunic only reached to above the ankles).

NEW EVIDENCE

The division of opinion discussed above seemed to the present writer to call for a more detailed investigation than any hitherto published. The obvious starting-point was County Durham, the only known source of the marble from which the effigy was made and where it was hoped to find evidence of common workmanship with datable effigies, so indicating both provenance and date for the Arbroath effigy.

Comparable effigies in north-east England

The monumental effigies in County Durham were treated in considerable detail by C H Hunter Blair (1929). From the available evidence, he considered it probable that a sculptor trained in the Purbeck tradition had set up in the north-east, possibly at Durham, in about 1280 and had worked there until about 1320, when intensification of the Anglo-Scottish wars, followed by the Black

Death, brought an end to the production of effigies locally. He considered that later effigies in the diocese were imported from elsewhere in England.

On the basis of Hunter Blair's survey and with additional guidance from Pevsner's volumes on Durham, Northumberland and North Yorkshire, six effigies of Frosterley marble were identified. (There is a seventh – a heavily worn and indecipherable slab in the burial ground of Durham Cathedral, close to the north-west door). In addition, 25 effigies in other materials were noted, either by date or by description, as of possible interest.

Of the Frosterley marble effigies – which are all that are thought to have survived the violent history of the region – only two proved to be of major importance: those of a lady at Easington and a deacon at Ryton (both in County Durham). Apart from the slab at Durham, the remainder are of knights and, except for two damaged lion foot-rests at Chester-le-Street, provide no useful material. The other 25 effigies provided only one example which requires to be considered – that of a lady at Woodhorn in Northumberland (carved from sandstone).

It is proposed to examine the selected effigies under three headings: principal figures; attendants; and foot-rests, all in relation to the question whether they and the Arbroath effigy can be considered to share a common source.

The principal figures: a lady of the closely related families of Fitzmarmaduke and Thweng, and displaying on her gown the fess between three popinjays of their shared coat-of-arms; at Easington (Frosterley marble) (illus 3); a deacon, at Ryton (Frosterley marble) (illus 4a); and a lady, at Woodhorn (sandstone) (illus 4b). She is probably either a member of a religious order or a devout widow.

The illustrations show the style and character of these sculptures more effectively than any description. It will be seen that the figures are all strongly realized and vigorously carved, and all convey a sense of vigour in the subject. Where the hands survive (illus 3 & 4a) they are prominent and strongly modelled, and there is skill in the handling of draperies. The figures are strikingly individual, so that no very close similarity can be claimed between them and the Arbroath figure, yet all display a confidence in handling this comparatively rare stone which is consistent with their being by the same hand. It is suggested that there is nothing pointing against that view.

The attendants: here, a more direct comparison can be drawn. In each case, as at Arbroath (illus 5), the attendants are in unusually intimate association with the principal figure.

At Easington, there are three small figures. There is one at each shoulder of the lady (both of these broken off at waist height). They appear to be a male at her right shoulder (illus 6a) and a female at her left, both kneeling, probably in the attitude of prayer. As will be seen, they may represent her children. At the foot of the slab is a small male figure, in a calf-length coat (illus 6b) with one hand on the slab and the other holding the hem of the lady's robe; his position suggests that he could be her steward or another confidential servant.

At Ryton, while the only attendants are the customary angels at the head, yet their hands are on the deacon's head and amice (collar) and are not, as is more usual, holding the pillow.

At Woodhorn, there are angels at the head, their hands holding the lady's veil, and attendants (who may represent nuns) who are actually hugging her shoes; (they are so damaged as to defy illustration).

All the figures, including those at Arbroath, are minute in size in relation to the principal figures. When complete, they would measure about 200 mm in height.

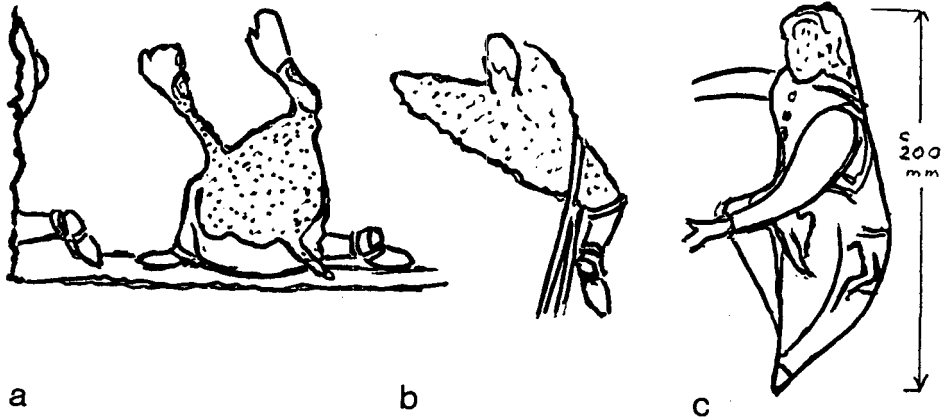
The foot-rests: when the foot-rests are examined, there is an even more direct affinity with Arbroath (illus 7). There are four lion foot-rests in the English examples. One (Ryton) is virtually complete, lacking only one ear. On the tomb at Woodhorn, the head of the lion (which is turned to look along



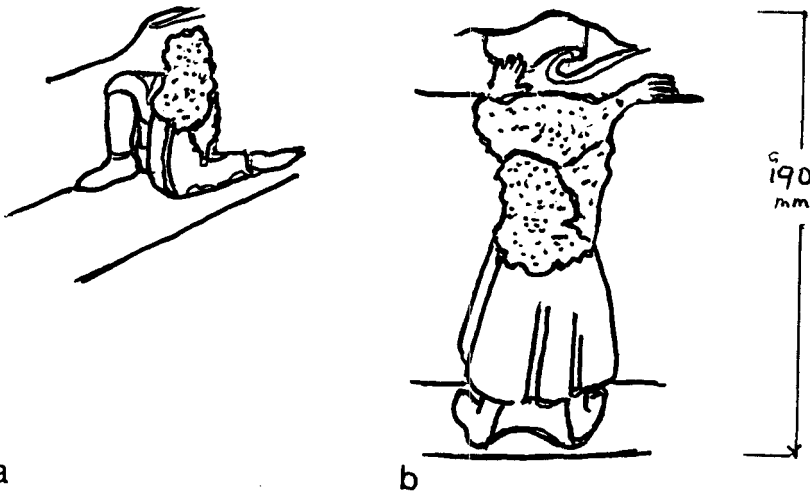
ILLUS 3 Effigy, of Frosterley marble, at Easington church, County Durham. It is considered to be that of Lady Isabel Bruce, wife of Sir John Fitzmarmaduke.



ILLUS 4 Effigy (*left*), of Frosterley marble, of a deacon, in Ryton church, County Durham; effigy (*right*), of sandstone, of a lady, in Woodhorn church, Northumberland

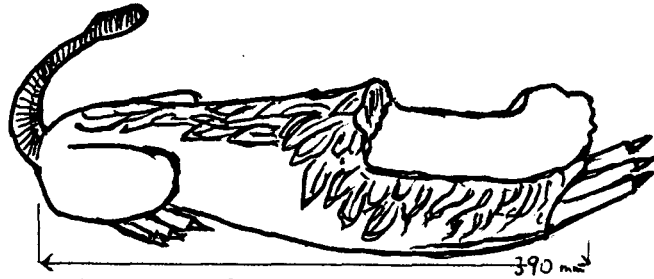


ILLUS 5 Attendant figures on the effigy at Arbroath: (a) two male figures, mailed and spurred, at the waist, dexter side; (b) mailed and spurred figure, at waist, sinister side; (c) female figure, at foot

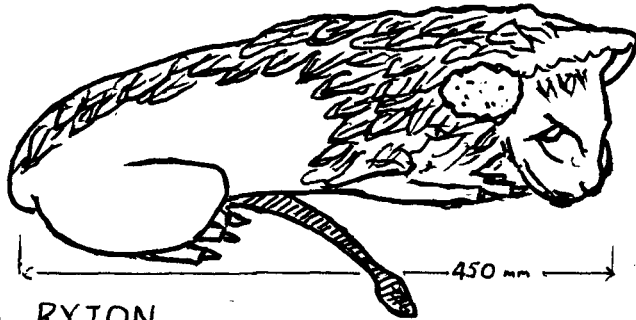


ILLUS 6 Attendant figures on the effigy at Easington: (a) male civilian figure, kneeling, at the right shoulder; (b) male civilian figure, at foot of slab

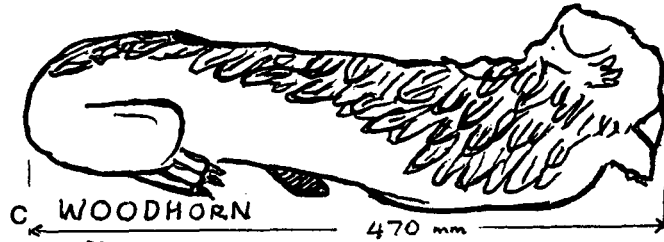
the principal figure towards its head) is mutilated, being broken off immediately below the eyes. The remaining two (at Chester-le-Street) lack the head and fore-part of the body. Simply to look at these four and the Arbroath lion creates a strong impression that they are kin: they might be from the same litter. All have the vigour and naturalness, with a touch of heraldry, that was noted at Arbroath. All accommodate to the position of the feet of the effigy. All show a continuation of the mane in a trail of curls down the spine to the root of the tail. In all, the curls, the toes and the claws are precisely similar and are crisply defined. There is one other characteristic: in no two is the disposition of the tail identical. Each is in a different position. (To illustrate this, the tails have been shaded in the illustrations.) Taken together, these lions suggest careful observation – possibly even of the domestic cat. They are as different as could be from the usual roly-poly pug-dog lions so often seen – eg on the effigies of ‘Good Sir James’ Douglas at Douglas (Lanarkshire) and Edward II at Gloucester.



a ARBROATH



b RYTON



c WOODHORN



d CHESTER-LE-STREET

ILLUS 7 Lion foot-rests. For ease of comparison, the lions are not shown to scale. The one at Woodhorn has been reversed; its head is turned away, towards the head of the principal figure. The two lions at Chester-le-Street are almost inaccessible.

Identification and dating: as is usual, there is no evidence on the monuments themselves or in written records to identify the individuals portrayed. However, in this case there is at least the evidence of coats-of-arms to identify the family and so assist identification of the subject. This applies to the effigies of the lady at Easington, two knights at Chester-le-Street and one (though the blazon is now obliterated) at Pitlington (Hunter Blair 1929, 13). In all these instances, the arms are of the Fitzmarmaduke/Thweng family, and individual knights have been identified by I'Anson (1926, 351; 1913, 75) who made particular studies of knights' effigies in north-east England and of the Fitzmarmadukes. He gives their dates of death as c 1300, 1311 and 1318 and, for the remaining (unidentified) knight at Whitworth c 1290.

In the case of the lady at Easington, there are substantial reasons for holding that she is Lady Isabel Bruce, daughter of Robert Bruce 'The Competitor', lord of Annandale, and that she was therefore an aunt of the future King Robert I of Scotland. She married Sir John Fitzmarmaduke, lord of Horden in the parish of Easington (the manor was close by the church); she had two children, a son and a daughter, and died in or before 1285 (when her husband remarried). Some of these details are narrated in the record of a claim to the manor of Stranton in the Calendar of Close Rolls (1389–92, 428: see also Offler 1988, 196). (In that record, there is some understandable confusion in referring to the various members of the Bruce family, three of whom – each named Robert – are mentioned.) There is no record of any issue of Sir John's second marriage and so, if the attendant figures at the shoulders of the effigy can be accepted as the lady's children, then Lady Isabel is the likely subject. The manor of Horden was disposed of by her son, Richard, who died childless in 1318.

The deacon at Ryton presents a problem. Here, there is no obvious clue, except that the splendour of his monument seems incongruous for one in minor orders. There was, however, a practice at the period we are considering of appointing as rector of one or more churches a man who held high office in the diocese. He then drew the stipend from his church(es), paid a priest to perform the parochial duties, and held the balance as the pay for his high office. If not himself a priest, the arrangement would require that he be given dispensation in order to be made rector. In the period of the workshop, Alan of Easingwold was Rector (1294–1311); he was also the Bishop's Official (ie judge in the diocesan court); and a favoured colleague of his bishop, the powerful Anthony Bek. Both Bek and he died in 1311 – Bek's tomb-slab in Durham Cathedral is of Frosterley marble. The only other Rector of Ryton to hold a comparable office was Nicholas Gategang, Rector from 1319 until his death in 1341 – and so, outwith the period. He was Temporal Chancellor of the diocese (*Fasti Dunelmensis* 42).

The lady at Woodhorn is popularly named as Agnes de Valence – but this can scarcely be accepted. Agnes was the daughter and sister of Earls of Pembroke, all of whose family are buried in Westminster Abbey. She was related to the English kings and was also sister-in-law of the deposed Scottish King John (Baliol). She died in 1309 in Hertfordshire. The effigy at Woodhorn more probably represents a nun – possibly a prioress – judging from her robes and those of her attendants. It appears to be of the same period as the other effigies discussed.

At this point, it is suggested that there is ample evidence to justify the view that the Arbroath effigy is a product of the Durham workshop which produced these other effigies, and that the workshop was active c 1280–1320. If that view is accepted, the question then arises; how was it possible to obtain a Durham effigy in Scotland when the two countries were in a state of open war?

THE PROBLEM OF PROCUREMENT

There are two possible answers to the problem. The first is that cross-border transactions were never entirely excluded, particularly for those with influence and with friends and supporters on both sides of the Border. The second answer is a matter of history.

Barrow (1988, 196-8: see also Scammell 1958, 385 *et seq.*) gives an account of the series of truces

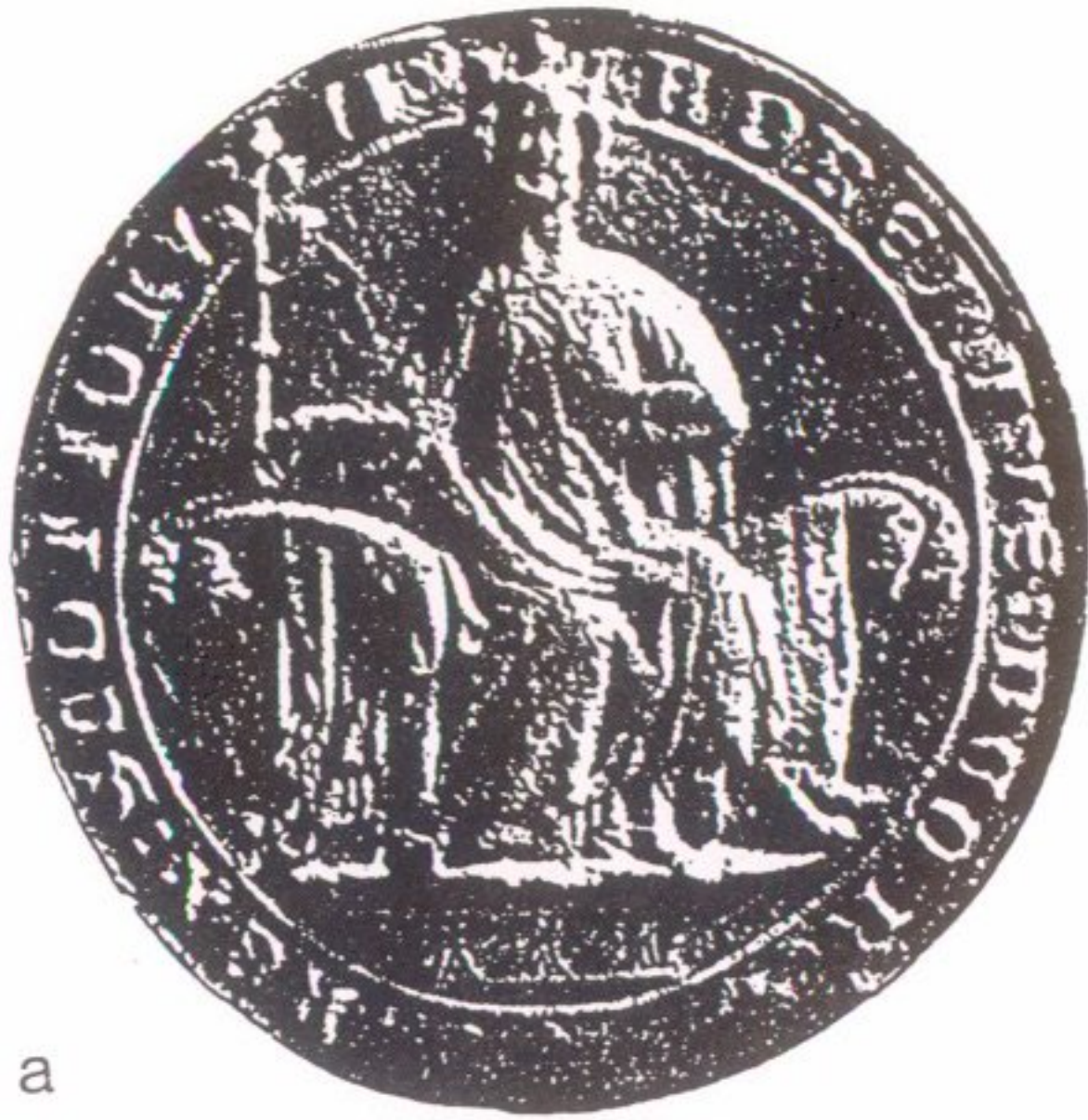
negotiated between Bruce and the northern counties between 1311 and 1315 and also in later years. In these, the principal negotiator for Durham was Richard Fitzmarmaduke, son of Isabel, and therefore a full cousin of King Robert (so that ‘cosyn’ in *Scalacronica*, p 143, should be read in its narrowest sense). They met for this purpose at least once, at Hexham in 1312. The Memorandum of Truce was signed by Richard on that occasion. (In that Memorandum, Bruce was, for the first time in England, designated King of Scotland (Reg Palat. Dunelm, 1, 204): ‘le noble prince monsire Robert, par le grace de Dieu roi d’Escoce’.) This should probably be ascribed only to family solidarity and to Bruce’s strong bargaining position.) The form of the truces gave free passage for the King and his armies through the County, and Bruce was again recorded as having been in County Durham in 1315. Quite apart from his family interests, he was a devout man and it seems unlikely that he would let pass his opportunities to visit the famous shrine of St Cuthbert at Durham, especially as St Cuthbert was regarded as a particular protector of the Scottish royal line. At Durham, it is likely that the workshop and its products would have been prominent.

Without going into excessive detail it can be noted that the links between the Bruces and Fitzmarmadukes were strong and went back as far as 1166 (*Complete Peerage* 2nd edn, vol X11 (Pt 1) ‘Thweng’, p 735). The substantial lands of Hart, in Cleveland, were held by the Scottish Bruces of the English Bruces, and sub-infeudated by the latter to the Fitzmarmadukes. (VCH 1928 vol 3, 256–7: Cal Pat. Rolls 1307–17). Their closeness is further illustrated by a delightful passage in Barbour’s *Bruce* (vol 3, xiii, 69–70) which describes how, after Bannockburn, Sir Marmaduke Thweng approached King Robert to surrender to him, only to be met with ‘Welcum Schyr Marmaduk’ and to be sent off, after some time with the King, with gifts and without having to pay ransom.

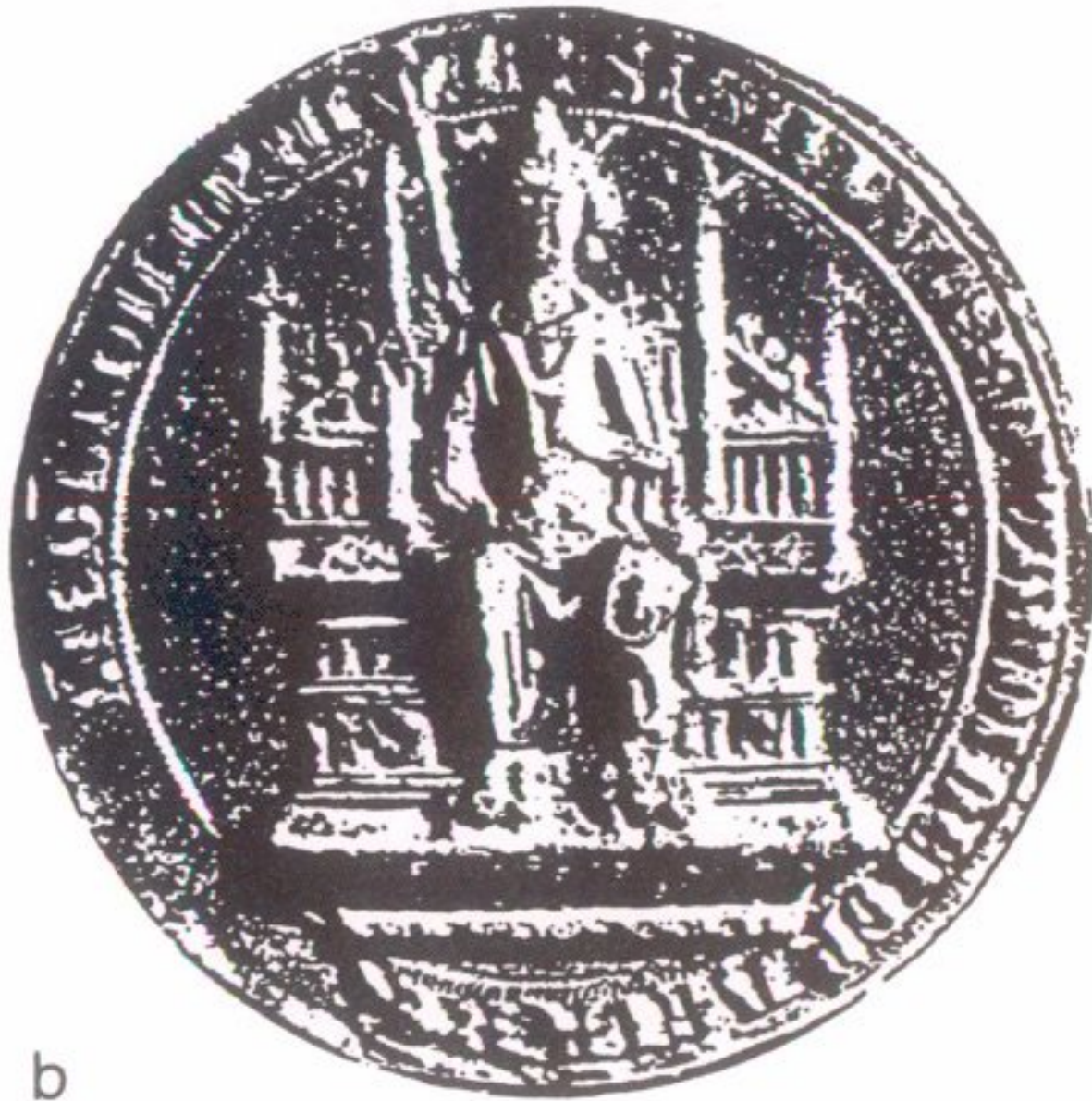
THE DESIGN OF THE COMPLETE EFFIGY

Undoubtedly the greatest obstacle to identifying the subject of the effigy at Arbroath is the absence of the upper parts. It seems odd that there is no indication that the mantle had in any way been displaced by the arms (illus 1). The well-marked border on the figure’s right side flows in an unbroken line from about the tip of the shoulder. Even in the conventional attitude of prayer, the right arm would have interrupted that line. The left arm must have been above the attendant mailed figure. A pose that would account for these features is found in the seals of several kings, including Robert Bruce (Birch 1907, vol 1, no 22) and Edward I of England on the seal (illus 8) used in his ‘government’ of Scotland (*ibid*, no 18) and aspects of it are seen on the near-contemporary effigies of Queen Eleanor of Castile, at Westminster, and of Edward II at Gloucester (Stothard 1876, 56 & 79). The virtue of this pose from the sculptor’s point of view, is that it avoids projections and so minimizes the risk of breakage, both during and after execution. No civilian equivalent has been traced. The matter can be taken even further, by considering the seal of Scone Abbey (illus 9) as used in the 14th century (Birch, vol 2, no 122). It shows a representation of the inauguration of a Scottish king, thought to be Alexander III. On either side of the king are two ecclesiastics and, beyond them, the figures of the two earls whose arms appear below, and who were considered by AAM Duncan (1975, 555) to be those who had presumably enthroned the king. (Richardson had suggested the same explanation of the mail-clad attendants on the Arbroath effigy: Richardson 1949, 69.) There is also an unidentifiable figure above the earl on the right. Bearing in mind that an English sculptor would be likely to require instruction in the insignia and representation of a Scottish king, that seal (or a description of the ceremony it illustrates) would serve the purpose; if the seal was used, the unidentifiable figure might be taken as a third attendant. In all the seals, it is reasonably clear that if the king were standing, his robes would be full-length.

It is suggested that the Arbroath effigy itself corresponds very substantially with the image of a king as shown on the seals; illus 10 shows a conjectural completion.



a



b

ILLUS 8 Seals: (a) King Robert Bruce; (b) King Edward I of England: seal for use in the 'government' of Scotland (from Birch 1907, vol 1, nos 22 & 18)



ILLUS 9 Seal of Scone Abbey (from Birch 1907, vol 2, no 122), with a diagrammatic scheme. Ecclesiastics (Ec) 1, probably Bishop of St Andrews; 2, probably Abbot of Scone; 3, carrying house-shaped shrine, possibly Abbot of Arbroath. Earls (E) Fife and Strathearn. Sennachie (S). Unidentified (U)



ILLUS 10 A conjectural reconstruction of the effigy at Arbroath

DISCUSSION

The facts which are beyond dispute are: that King William the Lion was buried before the high altar of Arbroath Abbey in 1214; that the Abbey was extensively damaged by storm and fire in 1272; that the Arbroath effigy was dug up in 1816 in a position consistent with the recorded site of the king's burial; that it is of Frosterley marble from County Durham; and that in 1315 King Robert Bruce made provision for the maintenance of lights round William's tomb in the Abbey. The last point – Bruce's grant – establishes beyond cavil that there was in the Abbey in 1315 a tomb recognized as that of King William; it is surely a fair inference that that tomb was in good condition.

The theory implicit in the present official guidebook is that at some stage, whether before or after Bruce's grant, an effigy of Frosterley marble might have been procured as part of the monument of an unidentified 'distinguished lay personage' other than King William. There is no record of this, but that is not significant. The presence of the three mailed and spurred attendants presumably indicates nobility, but the length of the robes seems to be unusual in that case (Henderson 1986, 97; Tummers 1980, 60). Further, the problem of the position of the arms, discussed above, would be more difficult to resolve. There is also the question of the find-site: above a coffin in front of the high altar. This theory would seem to require that the tomb of King William had been moved, something which is highly unlikely, given the degree of respect shown to both kings' and founders' tombs by the medieval church.

On the other hand, the proposition that the effigy is a replacement monument of William the Lion, obtained from north-east England, rests on the probability that the original monument did not survive the disaster of 1272 intact or, it could be, was considered inadequate in the rebuilt Abbey; it also rests on the opportunities provided by the truces with Durham and King Robert's connections with County Durham and his relationship and contacts with the Fitzmarmadukes, for him (or indeed his Chancellor, the Abbot) to secure the making and supply of a suitable monument. It is surely more than mere coincidence that Bruce's relations were major patrons of the Durham workshop?

For the design of the effigy, the evidence of the seals shows that it conformed generally to the iconography of kingship in Scotland and to one of the most important incidents of royal inauguration. The attitude of the mailed figures suggests a formalized gesture as of placing the king on a throne or on the Stone of Destiny. All this evidence supports the conclusion that the effigy is of a king, and therefore of William the Lion. The young women at the foot could be explained, on the analogy of Easington, as William's three daughters.

In any suggested investigation of the origins of the effigy, Bruce's grant in 1315 must occupy a most significant place. It is surely entirely understandable that at that stage in his reign he should wish to stress his place in the royal line by honouring a famous predecessor, and at the same time contribute to the restoration of Bernard's Abbey of Arbroath. When the provenance and dating of the effigy are taken into account, the most likely explanation is that Bruce's grant of funds for lights was only the final stage in the provision and installation by Bruce (or Abbot Bernard, no doubt with Bruce's approval) of a new and worthy effigy of King William the Lion. It is suggested that this conclusion is amply justified by all the evidence. If so, then it follows also that the Arbroath effigy is the only surviving effigy of a medieval King of Scotland.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It will be clear from the citations in the text how heavily I have relied on the writers of the extensive literature on matters involved in this search, and how well they have justified that reliance. Likewise, I must thank the Librarians and staffs of the libraries whose services I have put under requisition: the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh

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